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Perspectives on twentieth century philosophy

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Perspectives on twentieth century philosophy

A Reply to Tom Rockmore

Abstract

In this response paper, I want to address two issues in Tom Rockmore's paper. First, I will examine the background of some new tendencies in contemporary philosophy. Second, I want to pay attention to Rockmore's own interpretation of these tendencies.

1 A turning away from and a return to Hegel?

According to Rockmore, three tendencies dominate 20th century's philosophical debate, viz. the so-called continental philosophy, Anglo-American analytical philosophy, and American (neo-)pragmatism.¹ Between continental and analytic philosophy, being the two most important tendencies, hardly any debate was taking place; this was due to ignorance, scorn, and mutual lack of attention. However, this situation is gradually changing: especially American philosophers like Taylor, Nagel, Rorty and others discuss subjects in which until recently only continental philosophers used to be interested. Things have also changed in continental philosophy, albeit less clearly. I want to examine the background of this shifts and make a proposal to interpret them: in my view, these diverging philosophical trends can be seen as responses to Hegel's philosophy.

First, a preliminary remark. When I refer to Hegel in my interpretation, I do not only mean Hegel's philosophy in the strict sense; rather, I consider his thinking as the apex of a certain philosophical project. Its core was to understand the whole of reality, nature as well as history, matter as well as spirit, as manifestations of the absolute idea. According to some, the earliest sources of this project go back to Plato, but in any case it clearly comes to the fore in modern philosophy since Descartes. In general, this project can be brought under the heading of foundationalism; more specifically, analytic philosophy usually calls it metaphysics, while continental philosophy describes it primarily as ontotheology. In a sense, both analytic and continental philosophy of the 20th century turn away from this project, albeit in very different ways.

Let me begin with analytic philosophy. As Rockmore remarks, analytic philosophy opposed right from its beginning English neo-hegelianism of Bradley's sort and similar ones. It did not only criticize the latter's denial of the existence of an external world (anyway an unjust criticism), but also the bombastic, obscure

1. See Tom Rockmore, 'Remarks on the structure of twentieth century philosophy,' *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003), [<http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000128/index.html>].

style of Hegel's writings (and of most of his contemporaries), as well as his tendency to understand everything from the point of view of the totality: *das Wahre ist das Ganze*. Analytic philosophy took a great deal of its specific character from this threefold rejection of Hegel as the champion of dogmatic metaphysics. In the first place, instead of all embracing, synthetic constructions with a highly speculative content, it focused on the analysis of concrete small scale problems. Hence its name: *analytic* philosophy. Secondly, instead of long, complicated sentences, which looked more like Latin than German, analytic philosophy opted for clear, short sentences, closely related to ordinary language, it opted for starting from examples, taken from everyday life, and finally, it opted for a high degree of common sense. Thirdly, whereas Hegel superseded the contingency of experienced reality in the absolute idea, analytic philosophy focused on the problem of the way in which language or thought can refer to concrete, extramental reality. Because of all these reasons, analytic philosophy can be interpreted as a turning away from the speculative character of Hegel's metaphysics and a turning to ordinary language, which Rorty calls the linguistic turn. The way in which analytic philosophy renounced Hegel's philosophy consisted in ignoring it and in taking for granted all kinds of prejudices with regard to this philosophy.

On the other side, we find continental philosophy. I agree with Rockmore that Heidegger is the key-person in order to understand continental philosophy. However, I think that his thinking is not so much to be understood as a response to Husserl, but rather as an attempt to overcome metaphysics, in particular Hegel's. The same holds true for other continental philosophers like Levinas, Derrida and even Habermas. According to Heidegger, Hegel's philosophy is the apex of ontotheology, the confusion of the questions of being and of God. Consequently, in Hegel's philosophy, the plurality and the historicity of being cannot be conceptualised, since it grounds this contingency on God as the absolute ground. Although both analytic and continental philosophy rejected Hegel's metaphysics, they largely differed in the manner in which they distanced themselves from his project. In spite of all their criticisms, not only Heidegger, but also Levinas, Derrida, and Habermas are very much indebted to the Hegelian project; their aim is to show the unthought in his metaphysics in order to overcome it.

However, if we take a look at more recent developments in Anglo-American philosophy, we see a growing interest in Hegel; one need to think only of Rorty's neopragmatism and the philosophy of Charles Taylor. This interest is connected with a certain disappointment of analytic philosophy. Since, although it rejected foundationalist metaphysics, it was nevertheless foundationalist in its epistemology, as the example of the Vienna circle makes clear. But precisely because of its approach of epistemological questions, it gradually became more and more formalistic and moved away from concrete reality. Moreover, it proved to be unsuccessful in solving its central (foundationalist) problem, the issue of reference, in a satisfactory way. That is why analytic philosophy became interested again in all kinds of concrete human and social questions. After the linguistic turn it made, as it were, a turn to culture. Due to this turn, however, other aspects of Hegel's thought came to the fore in analytic philosophy, especially through Rorty's

neopragmatism and Taylor. Beyond the coercive systematic of dialectics and the dogmatic aspects of his work, beyond the abstruse character of his writings, it discovered a Hegel more sensitive to hermeneutical questions, analyzing with great subtlety all kinds of crucial questions of our culture, religion, history, law, art etcetera. The metaphysical Hegel of the Encyclopedia was in a way exchanged with the cultural-philosophical Hegel of the Phenomenology. As a consequence of this turn, the debate with continental philosophy was taken up again and proved to be fruitful. In continental philosophy, the interest for fundamental questions about our times and culture was growing as well. The provisional result of this process is that both analytic and continental philosophy seem to agree that in our times philosophy should be more than ever '*ihre Zeit in Gedanken erfasst*,' which is indeed a very Hegelian idea of the task of philosophy.

My proposal to understand the recent developments in analytic and continental philosophy is the following: they can be interpreted in terms of a double movement of turning away from the metaphysical Hegel on the one hand, and turning towards the hermeneutical Hegel on the other; alternatively phrased, as a turn away from foundationalist epistemology and metaphysics and a turn to (non-foundationalist) philosophy of culture.

2 The consequences of Kant's Copernican revolution

In the second part of his paper, Rockmore presents his own interpretation of the relation between analytic philosophy, continental philosophy and (neo-)pragmatism. Kant's Copernican revolution and its implications play a key role in his analysis. Roughly spoken the consequence of this revolution is the following: in order to be able to perceive and to know, the subject does not passively register the sensuous impressions coming to his sense-organs, but plays an active, constructive role in the process of knowledge. As Rockmore shows, the importance of this revolution can hardly be overestimated. It causes a break between pre- and post-kantian philosophy, between pre-modern realism and post-modern constructivism. Seen from this perspective, the project of analytic philosophy, trying to prove whatever flavour of realism, has failed. In the Anglo-American world the positive result of this failure is pragmatism, which has replaced analytic philosophy to a large extent. Pragmatism takes the Copernican revolution as its point of departure and fully accepts its constructivistic consequences.

I would like to elaborate on this interpretation of Rockmore. It is beyond doubt that Kant's Copernican revolution paved the way for all kinds of contemporary constructivism. But Kant was also a child of the Enlightenment, a movement in which everything seems to hinge upon the universality of reason. Kant took this crucial element into account by stressing the universality of the categories of understanding. The subject that construes knowledge is not an empirical, but a transcendental subject. This means that the categories, which constitute the mould with which it construes knowledge, are subjective. But at the same time they are also transcendental, i.e. universal conditions of our knowledge. Due to this universality, objective science is possible. In the philosophy after Kant,

in particular from Marx, Kierkegaard and even more clearly from Nietzsche and Heidegger onwards, this universality of the knowing subject is seriously undermined. The categories upon which the knowledge of the subject are based, are rooted in ideological and psychological concerns; they are manifestations of the will to power or dependent on a certain givenness of being. In this way an awareness of radical finiteness or perspectivity is introduced in philosophy, a finiteness which renders any appeal to universality problematic. Moreover, this awareness not only dominates contemporary philosophy but also culture in general; in this respect, we only need to think of the issue of multiculturalism. It is obvious that pragmatism and continental philosophy take this contemporary consciousness of radical finiteness much more into account than analytic philosophy.

On the basis of my supplement to Rockmore's interpretation of the structure of 20th century philosophy, I want to draw a totally different conclusion than his. The promise for the philosophy of the 21st century is not so much a further elaboration of constructivism, as Rockmore suggests, but looking for an answer to the extremely complex issue of how we, with all our finiteness and perspectivism, can keep an open mind for the infinite and the universal. If we think of ourselves as being able to know reality from an absolute point of view, something of which foundationalist metaphysics and epistemology are dreaming, this is obviously at odds with the reality of our human finiteness; but if, on the other hand, we feel completely comfortable with our finite, subjective constructions and feel no need to reach for something beyond our own subjectivity, we frustrate a fundamental element of what it means to be human as well, viz. the drive to discuss with others questions of what makes life worth living, about how we can do justice to others, about how we, with all our constructions, may get a view, however imperfect, of the essential.²

2. Paper presented at a conference at Utrecht University, The Netherlands, June 26th, 2003.